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# THE PHONETIC METHOD IN TEACHING MODERN LANGUAGES

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Let me first briefly outline the phonetic method of instruction in modern foreign languages as it is employed in numerous European schools, more particularly in certain secondary schools in Germany. It is variously known as the phonetic, the direct, the imitative, the analytical-inductive, the new, or the reform method, according as one salient feature of the system is emphasized to the exclusion of all others, or as attention is focused upon its departure from the traditional method of instruction. For the purpose of the present discussion the designation I have adopted seems to me the most appropriate one.

The starting-point for instruction according to this method is the spoken word, not the printed page, the sound, not the letter. Hence, teaching is at first exclusively oral. The task of the pupil at this stage consists in mastering the sounds of the language to the extent that he learns to recognize them when uttered in his hearing and to reproduce them according to the model of the teacher. Not until he knows the sounds does he meet their equivalent in writing.

In accordance with this oral basis, pronunciation is considered of prime importance. Painstaking care is necessary at the outset, since the pupil already speaks his own tongue, to have him hear the peculiarities of the foreign sounds and to enable him to utter them himself. For this purpose recourse is had to the assistance offered the schoolroom by the physiology of speech sounds, the science of phonetics. The pupil is taught the organic positions and movements requisite to produce the sounds in question. For the purpose of simplifying this task many adherents of the reform movement make a more or less extended use of phonetic symbols.

Another cardinal doctrine of the reformers is the belief that the more direct the connection established between a thing and

its name, the more direct the association between an idea and its expression, the more permanent and effective it will be. Therefore, except where absolutely necessary, the mother tongue is excluded. The pupil is obliged to think and express himself in the foreign idiom and the teacher uses the same medium of communication. Pantomime, gesture, bodily movement, impressions made by concrete objects upon the various senses, all sorts of devices are employed to enable the instruction to dispense with the vernacular. After some advance has been made, since not all objects are objects of sense and not all ideas are ideas of concrete things, this mode of procedure is continued through reliance upon that command of the language which the pupil has gradually acquired.

The reading-book forms the center of instruction, only connected texts being read. Subject-matter, terms, and phraseology are assimilated directly without the mediation of translation. Through imitation or reproduction of what has been heard from the lips of the teacher, or what has been worked out in the reading-book, with the aid of question and answer, dialogue, description, and explanation, all new material is impressed upon the mind and fixed in the memory.

A vocabulary is acquired, not by mechanically memorizing lists of words, which are applied a single time in the reading-lesson and then possibly worked over in sentences translated by the pupil from the vernacular, but through frequent repetition of the terms, the meaning of which has been learned by the devices above enumerated. This acquisition is facilitated through constant reference to the connection in which the new words or expression has occurred. When the reading of literary texts begins, of course the use of the dictionary is indispensable.

Of all departments of language-study no one has excited the opposition of the reform school to such a degree as the traditional treatment of grammar in instruction for beginners. With the reformers the principle obtains: first the language, then the grammar. By this is not meant that a language can be acquired without a knowledge of its grammatical structure; even the use of the mother tongue presupposes this. What the reformers do

claim, however, is that the learner can acquire a gradually increasing command of a foreign language without having to be able first to formulate the principle upon which every linguistic phenomenon he applies in practice depends. Through acquaintance with sufficient examples of the phenomenon in question he comes, unconsciously, to appropriate it in a far more efficient way than by the old procedure. This attitude toward grammar grows out of restrictions imposed by the very nature of the method. Since the pupil is to be accustomed from the first to connected discourse, since he is trained to question and answer, to follow and take part in dialogues and descriptions, this mode of instruction would be impossible if a complete mastery of the grammatical principles involved in every phrase or expression had to keep pace with his growing power in oral and written command of the language.

But the theory of grammar, the grouping of language-facts in a systematic manner, according to definite rules, is in no wise neglected; only it is done, to use a favorite expression of the reformers, "auf induktivem Wege."

Basing upon his mastery of the linguistic material appropriated for the most part unconsciously through imitation of and patterning after his model, the pupil is led either by his own efforts to find or under the direction of the teacher to recognize the grammatical principle to which attention is directed and of which illustrations are embodied in the dialog, narrative, or description under consideration. After recognition and formulation of the principle, ingeniously constructed exercises, always in connection with the text, afford abundant practice in declensions and conjugations. Thus, step by step, proceeding from the particular to the general, i. e., from the example to the rule, each group of phenomena is studied until a considerable body of grammatical knowledge has been built up. The sections on grammar in the reading-book or the separate chapters in the regular grammar are to be employed for reference to assist the pupil in review or to supplement what has been left fragmentary.

The use of *Realien* constitutes a valuable adjunct to this method of instruction. In addition to the well-known and widely

used pictures of the seasons by Hölzel, upon which conversation can be based, whatever tends to throw light upon the material and spiritual life of the nation whose language is being studied receives a hearty welcome. With this end in view the first texts studied are constructed. Pictures of celebrated persons and important places, maps and plans of cities, casts and models, illustrated descriptions of garb, manners, and customs, photographs depicting historical events, reproductions of works of art in painting and sculpture, views of landscapes noted for their beauty, are introduced not simply to enliven the work of the classroom but to familiarize the pupil with the foreign environment. To some extent even geography and history, political and social institutions, industrial conditions, make up the subject-matter of instruction. In short, a systematic effort is put forth to create an atmosphere most conducive to a sympathetic appreciation of the foreign land and people.

If so much assistance in preparation be given by the teacher, where does the effort come from upon which permanent acquisition depends? The reformer would reply to this objection: Only in the first stages of his study does the pupil receive a great amount of assistance, as every unaided step is then fraught with danger. Nowhere in the whole field of education does initiatory blundering show more disastrous consequences than in the learning of a foreign language. Moreover, as long as the pupil is in the classroom constant appeal is being made to his self-activity. It would be difficult to imagine a more rigorous discipline in self-expression than a course in which he is persistently required to prove his mastery of the subject-matter by using in speech and in writing the foreign medium of expression.

The foregoing outline will show that many of the ideas employed by the reform school are not distinctive of the method called phonetic. On the contrary, long before Vietor appeared on the scene with his celebrated pamphlet,<sup>1</sup> some of the leading features of the system had been strenuously advocated by educa-

<sup>1</sup> Quousque Tandem (Wilhelm Vietor), *Der Sprachunterricht muss umkehren*, 3d ed., Leipzig, 1905, enlarged with notes; original ed., anonymous, 1882.

tional reformers. Moreover, every so-called "natural method," whether it be the one represented by Heness and Sauveur or that known as the "psychological" method of Gouin, insists upon the importance of the spoken language as the starting-point. Even the use of connected texts and the subordination of grammar to practical command of the language through imitation and reproduction had been embodied in previous attempts to bring language study more in line with genetic principles. Vietor himself candidly admits that "the so-called new method is only comparatively new,"<sup>2</sup> and the same fact appears from any historical survey of the subject.<sup>3</sup> Recognizing then in significant respects points of similarity to previous reform ideas, we see the distinctive features of the programme inaugurated by Vietor in the importance attached to pronunciation and the adaptation of phonetic study to the service of elementary instruction. While practice differs somewhat in the extent to which phonetic symbols are employed, some only transcribing words in the vocabulary, others going so far as to use phonetic texts exclusively throughout the whole of the first year, all adherents of the school are united in regarding pronunciation as of prime significance to the beginner and in aiding him through training his ear and organs of speech to gain a mastery of the foreign sounds.

Hausknecht, the author of *The English Student*, a beginner's book widely used in Germany, divides a four years' course into an elementary course of a year and a half, a junior course of a year and a half, and a senior course of one year. Of the elementary course about the first four weeks, called the introductory stage, are devoted to practicing the foreign sounds. Attention is first called to the distinction between sound and letter; while there are only six vowel letters, there are many more vowel sounds. For one and the same letter we may have several sounds, while one and the same sound may be represented by several letters. In practicing the sounds the pupil imitates the teacher; much repetition is necessary so that he may learn to grasp accu-

<sup>2</sup> *Ed. Rev.*, Vol. VI, November, 1893, p. 351.

<sup>3</sup> See Dr. Bahlsen's excellent monograph, "New Methods of Teaching Modern Languages," in *Teachers' College Rec.*, Vol. IV, May, 1903.

rately and reproduce clearly. Some directions as to the movements and position of the tongue and lips may be advantageous. For this purpose the teacher must know phonetics, but for the pupil systematic instruction of the kind is superfluous; after he can correctly reproduce the sound he may forget its physiological explanation. For French, practice in complete sentences is necessary on account of voice modulation, stress, and *liaison*. Single words may be taken at first; later on continuous texts in prose and verse. Single words allow of a systematic arrangement of the sounds and can often be selected, as in the case of historical and geographical proper names, from foreign words used in the pupil's own language. By introducing into the preliminary sound-exercises some continuous passages showing the simplest grammatical relations, the transition to the reading-pieces of the first main stage is facilitated. Probably no book is required for the first lessons of the introductory stage. Later it is needed for review in home preparation. The greater part of the lesson must be oral. Phonetic texts are unnecessary. Good results are obtained if the ordinary orthography is used from the beginning, the phonetic transcription of words being reserved for the vocabulary. The pupil need only be able to read phonetic symbols; writing them may lead to confusion. In the next part of the elementary course the same careful attention is paid to pronunciation.<sup>4</sup>

Bahlsen, in the monograph just noted, recommends a more extended use of phonetic transcription. According to his plan this preliminary sound-drill extends over about two months, during which time the pupil uses no textbook, the teaching being wholly oral. His beginners' class in English employs for home preparation a phonetic transcription prepared by the teacher himself. After the expiration of two months, pieces from the textbook are assigned to be copied in the traditional orthography; this is followed by dictation exercise on the same text after the pupils have memorized the usual spelling at home. Dr. Bahlsen maintains "that even in the first tests a material detriment to the correct

<sup>4</sup> Cf. "The Teaching of Foreign Languages," *Sadler's Reports on Educational Subjects*, Vol. III, No. 9, pp. 499 ff.

orthography has not resulted.' Moreover, this same teacher does not hesitate to make a minute study of sound physiology with his classes, of course only for practical purposes. He uses phonetic charts on which vowels and consonants are grouped according to the place and manner of their articulation. He explains the activity of the organs concerned in the production of the various sounds. While he is in favor of withholding from classroom instruction the scientific terminology of the phonetician, he does not shrink from explaining to his pupils the characteristic differences in sound production between the mother tongue and the foreign language, tracing them to their physiological origin.

Walter, the well-known Direktor of the Reform Real-Gymnasium at Frankfurt-am-Main, has perhaps gone farther than any other German schoolman in his advocacy of phonetics for beginners.<sup>5</sup> In his opinion the desired proficiency in pronunciation can most readily be attained if nothing but phonetic texts, accompanied by sustained and systematic use of the sound-chart, are employed during the first three months of instruction. The greater the discrepancy between the pronunciation and the orthography of the given language, the stronger support for the avoidance of an incorrect pronunciation and the acquisition of a pure one will be found in a thorough study of phonetic texts. As an experiment English was begun in *Untersekunda*, i. e., with boys of about fourteen to fifteen, with only a very moderate use of transcription, the transition to ordinary spelling being made after some preliminary study of phonetic texts with the aid of the Vietor charts. But the result in this case was less satisfactory than in the case of a class in *Untertertia*, i. e., with boys two years younger, where phonetic texts were employed exclusively during the first quarter. Older boys require this thorough drill more than the younger ones, since their vocal organs are less flexible and hence do not permit them to imitate the foreign sounds with the same facility. Even if spelling were rendered more difficult by this process, it would be far easier to correct

<sup>5</sup> See especially his *Englisch nach dem Frankfurter Reformplan*. Marburg, 1900.



mistakes of spelling than to overcome the habit of incorrect pronunciation.

Although the reform movement has met with more or less enthusiastic reception on the Continent and in England, and seems to be gaining ground all the time, it appears to have made but little headway in the United States. Now and then we hear of sporadic attempts to introduce this or that feature as, e. g., when a certain amount of conversation is employed, or when the course is begun with the reading of connected texts and only the essentials of grammar are studied in an incidental way, or when representations of life and scenes in foreign countries are employed, or when some preliminary attention is given to pronunciation on a phonetic basis. Where the circumstances surrounding the instruction are especially favorable to such a mode of procedure, certain teachers employ the foreign language as far as practicable as the medium of communication in the classroom. On the whole, however, our practice seems to be dominated by the reading method. According to this method the pupil spends all but a fraction of the time devoted to the foreign language in the reading of literary texts, in the understanding of which he is expected to acquire proficiency enough, provided he pursue the study sufficiently long, to dispense with translation into the mother tongue. This is the plan that appeared to the Committee of Twelve of the Modern Language Association of America best adapted to the secondary instruction of this country. It is not my purpose to criticize the stand taken in that report, with the essentials of which my own attitude thoroughly accords. I simply wish to emphasize two or three matters which, in my judgment, have not received the consideration they merit at the hands of the American teacher.

Psychology based on the study of the brain teaches that four distinct areas of this organ are concerned in the acquisition of language, known respectively as the auditory center, the visual center, the motor-speech center, and the graphic center—the first two sensory, the last two motor. The auditory center receives impressions from the ear, the visual center from the eye, the motor-speech center controls the movements of the vocal organs,

the graphic center the movements of the hand in writing. Now, each one of these centers not only receives impressions directly from the sense-organ with which it is connected or sends impulses to the muscles which it controls, but in speaking, reading, or writing, nerve currents known as "association impulses" are constantly passing from one center to the other. In the development of the child as well as that of the race oral speech comes before written speech. Before the child learns to read he has already had so many years of practice in speaking and hearing speech. Accordingly, we expect to find and really do find, as has been pointed by Dr. Lukens<sup>6</sup> that "the motor-speech center and the auditory-word center have a far better established organization physically than the writing and reading centers." On this account these centers may be regarded as primary while the writing and reading centers appear as subordinate and secondary. Hence it appears to me that we are neglecting a valuable hint furnished us by the very organization of our brain as to the method we ought to pursue, if we pay no more attention to colloquial practice than is ordinarily done. By colloquial practice I mean anything of the nature of oral expression and communication. To this position the objection may be made, with a considerable degree of justice, that a distinction must be drawn between the process of a child learning to understand its first language, the mother tongue, and the process of an adolescent or adult acquiring a second, a foreign language. While in the former case the learner has to depend in the main upon auditory images and to a very slight extent upon visual impressions gained from observing the lips of the speaker, in the latter case the chief avenue of approach may reasonably be taken along the visual road, through the use of books. Notwithstanding this difference it still remains true that we cannot afford to lose sight of the gain to be derived from employing those channels through which the child has made his first acquisition in language and as a result of which they furnish a physical basis for further linguistic attainment.

<sup>6</sup> *Ped. Sem.*, Vol. III, June, 1896, p. 431.

Another basis for the advantage to be derived from ample oral exercise is to be found in the law of association and the operation of the memory. Without memory there can be no acquisition of language, not even of one's native speech.

Those experiences are most readily remembered that make the strongest impressions upon our minds. In order to secure the most powerful impression of a given object as many senses as possible must be called into requisition. That is the reason, e. g., why we frequently stop to write on the black-board some word or expression that has come up incidentally in class and that we are solicitous to have our pupils remember; in order to fix the word or expression more firmly we then have it repeated by one or more members of the class. This means simply that we are seeking to establish as many associations as possible by regarding the same language fact from different points of view, from the auditory side, from the visual side, from the motor-speech side. Applied to the common practice of depending solely upon the reading of a given text for an assimilation of its linguistic content, the law of association bids us not to be content with this single appeal to the visual sense. It urges upon us the necessity of going over the same ground through the other avenues open to the mind. The oftener the path is traversed from idea to word and from word to idea, and the more varied the path chosen, the firmer becomes the mental grasp. The more associations set up, the more closely does the material get interwoven into our mental structure.<sup>7</sup> It not infrequently occurs in reading-classes that the text in hand is not read aloud in the original, the teacher being satisfied to have the pupil show merely by his translation that he has made adequate preparation. I consider this a serious pedagogical mistake, except of course when the reading is done for the sake of the material content alone. Through being compelled to pronounce the passage read the pupil is not restricted to his visual memory for a retention of the text; he has two other sources to fall back upon, the memory of the movements of the vocal organs and the memory of the resultant

<sup>7</sup> See James, *Talks to Teachers*, especially the chapter on "Memory."

auditory image. His mastery of the language-content of the passage will be proportionate to the sum-total of the impressions received.<sup>8</sup>

With regard to the matter of pronunciation it is urged in some quarters that while it may be highly desirable for the teacher to be able to give to the foreign language its native ring, it does not, after all, matter much whether the pupil can reproduce the German and French sounds with accuracy. But this attitude cannot be sanctioned upon due consideration of the interests involved. From the relation of pronunciation to oral expression, whether the latter consist simply in reading aloud a given text in preparation at home and in classwork, or whether it include colloquial practice in any or all of its forms, it is evident that some sort of pronunciation is necessary. If this be the case, even admitting that the pupil may in many points fall short of the foreign model, I maintain that we should hold him up to the maximum degree of accuracy obtainable under the circumstances; and with competent instruction and not abnormally defective organs a close approach to the original is possible. Careful attention to the details of pronunciation trains his ear and vocal organs and makes him susceptible to differences which would otherwise escape observation. This is a valuable aesthetic exercise both in itself and because it reacts in a helpful way upon his enunciation of the mother tongue. If a correct and clear pronunciation of English is desirable, since slovenly, careless, incorrect utterance is a mark of illiteracy, why should we be satisfied with less in a foreign language? A good pronunciation is pleasing both to him who possesses it and to him who hears it. Moreover, this sort of training has the same sort of disciplinary value that belongs to careful attention to details in any department. Finally, he who has learned to pronounce well has laid the foundation for an accomplishment that may become eminently profitable in after life. He may be called upon to put to use in a practical way the results of his foreign-language study and he will find in his communication with foreigners no more effective aid to mutual

<sup>8</sup> Pershing, "Language and Brain Disease," *Popular Science Monthly*, October, 1892, has some valuable suggestions along this line.

intelligibility than the power he has gained from attention to pronunciation.

Whether or not the teacher will avail himself of the help offered by the application of phonetics to this part of the instruction will depend in the main upon his acquaintance with the subject, upon his appreciation of the difficulties involved, and upon his taste for work of such nature. No one will deny that the learner needs to be informed of the differences between the sounds of his native speech and the related sounds of the foreign tongue, unless his version of it is to be a mere caricature. A little elementary instruction in the physiological production of speech-sounds will impart to him this information, for which no elaborate apparatus and no great expenditure of time is required. The objection to the use of phonetics assumes one of two forms. Either it is maintained that the introduction of sound-symbols increases a task already difficult enough and interferes with acquisition of the usual orthography, or else it is claimed that all study of sound-production is superfluous or even fruitless as the pupil can learn pronunciation by imitation. These objections may supplement one another. As to the first, we have the assurance of reformers who are experienced teachers and who have made abundant use of phonetic notation, that no marked effect upon the orthography is noticeable, that the gain on the other side, however, is considerable. My own experience in the use of sound-symbols with children has been too limited to allow me to form a pronounced opinion. But wherever I have used them the transition to ordinary spelling has been made without difficulty. As to the popular appeal to imitation, Sweet<sup>9</sup> remarks that it is as fallacious to suppose that pronunciation can be learned by mere imitation as it is to suppose that one can learn fencing by seeing other people fence. In order to imitate correctly I must first hear correctly. Now this is not so easy as is commonly believed. My range of hearing is limited by a well-defined basis of audition, according to which I can perceive adequately only those sounds to which my ear has been trained from childhood

<sup>9</sup> *The Practical Study of Languages*, p. 5.

and for which it has developed the requisite auditory habit. But this is not all. In order to imitate correctly, I must be able to reproduce what I hear. In this again my ability is limited by a well-defined basis of articulation dependent upon the speech-characteristics of my native tongue. These considerations strengthen the conviction that we must, if we wish to secure the best results possible, adopt all means at our disposal to overcome or lessen the difficulties in the way of hearing and reproducing the foreign sounds. Our most efficient instrument to attain this end is a clear knowledge of the organs concerned in sound-production and the mode of their operation. A not very keen sense of hearing can be compensated by knowledge of the exact process of vocalization, but the most sensitive ear cannot compensate for marked deficiency on the other side; just as in the playing of a musical instrument technique goes a long way toward making up what is lacking in feeling, while the most soulful performer is powerless to express his feeling when he lacks the necessary technique.

The use of phonetic symbols is a matter relatively indifferent. They are a convenient device for recalling the auditory image, enabling one to obtain the end in view more readily than by depending upon the unaided memory. If charts are at hand and the book employed contains the phonetic transcription of at least the vocabulary, writing the symbols on the part of the pupils may be dispensed with without loss. Further, acquaintance with phonetic principles and phonetic notation can be of benefit indirectly in enabling pupils to reproduce sounds aimed at by phonetic transcription in dictionaries, whether of their own tongue or any other foreign language than the one they are engaged upon.<sup>30</sup> Of course, to accomplish this purpose a uniform system of notation is requisite.

We have noticed the desirability of paying more heed to oral expression than is at present the case in much of our foreign-language instruction. We have also noticed the reasons for

<sup>30</sup> As has been pointed out by Professor Hempl in the volume of *Proceedings* of the N. E. A. for 1906, pp. 192 ff.

insisting upon a good pronunciation and have referred to the advantages that phonetics offers in assisting us to realize this aim. Even if a reduction of the reading-course should be necessary in consequence, I believe the loss would be more than counterbalanced by the gain.